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AUTHOR Mann, Lynne F.
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ABSTRACT

While the play of young children has been recognized as a facilitator and a manifestation of cognitive change from egocentric to de-centered interpretations of reality, play activities for the young, profoundly deaf child have been viewed as a frivolity with little educational merit. Empirical evidence suggests that the play of deaf children develops through stages in the same order as the play of hearing children, although language, environment, and education restrict the play of young deaf children. Since research exists that indicates that the play of deaf and hearing children differs only in the number of minutes spent in different categories of play, it would seem logical to provide the young deaf child an environment designed to facilitate play development. Four basic, necessary environmental components for facilitating play development among these children are (1) adults to play with, (2) materials and equipment to use in play, (3) ample time to play, and (4) a place to play. (To help teachers shift from a teacher-directed to a child-centered classroom, concluding sections of the paper suggest ways of implementing each of the environmental components.) (Author/RH)

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Play and the Non-Verbal Child

Lynne F. Mann, Ed.D.

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There is one "Truth" in the life of an educator of young children. This "Truth" is that at some time, by some parent, colleague, or administrator, the educator of young children will be required to justify the amount of time that she "lets" the children in her classroom "play". This "Truth" has been particularly troublesome for the educator of young handicapped children.

The teacher of young deaf children is acutely aware that a deaf child, from birth, will be language handicapped. Consequently, most educational programs for young deaf children are designed to remediate this language deficit. "Play" in a classroom for the young profoundly deaf child has been viewed as "not as important" as auditory training, speech therapy, or language training. Therefore, the teacher of the deaf has an awesome task when asked to justify the "need" for "play" when the children in her care must spend their time in school "catching up" on language. Play, it seems, in the classroom for the deaf, is a frivolity which has little educational merit.

Play, in fact, is a primary agent for cognitive change. It is through play that young children learn.

Play is defined as the process through which a child experiments with and interprets his environment. Through manipulation, imitation, and experimentation, the child proceeds from a subjective, egocentric understanding of his world to an objective, de-centered, interpretation of reality. This gradual shift from subjective to objective reality occurs as the child's cognitive abilities develop through

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increasingly sophisticated levels. Cognitive growth is therefore manifested in the observable play behaviors of the child. Play, an external vehavioral manifestation of cognitive development is essential to that development (Mann, 1981).

The traditional "teacher-directed" classroom for young deaf children seems antithetical to the child-centered environment implicit in the above definition of "Play".

The shift from a teacher-directed class to a child-centered environment is, like all changes and re-orientations, a developmental process. Rather than debate the effectiveness of one educational approach over another, the concern here is to provide evidence which will encourage independent decision making. Initially, theoretical and empirical evidence will be presented which provide a rationale for change. Suggestions for implementing change, based on the theoretical implications, will then be presented.

It would do well at this point to highlight some theoretical evidence which supports the tenet of play as a necessary agent for cognitive change. Child's play is the catalyst for optimal learning (Fagan, 1975). It is through play, interaction with the environment, that cognitive development occurs. That play affords the child the opportunity to increase his variety of responses to new situations, to suggest that play is related to representational thought, and that play enhances creativity has been documented by several researchers (Sutton-Smith, 1967, 1971; Lieberman, 1965; Sigel, 1966). Perhaps

the most convincing argument that play is an agent of cognitive change is presented by Piaget (1962), who maintains that interaction and experiences with the environment enables the child to advance to higher levels of cognitive functioning and that. . . Play and cognitive development are mutually supportive, inseparable and interdependent (Piaget, 1966).

With the above information, a definition of "Play", and some evidence which relates play to cognitive change, it is now necessary to highlight empirical evidence dealing with play and non-verbal children; a recent study comparing the play behaviors of profoundly deaf children (ages 3-5 years old) to the play behaviors of their hearing counterparts (Mann, 1981). The results of the above study indicate that in general, the observed play behaviors followed the conceptual framework of play behaviors found by other researchers using larger populations of hearing children (Parten, 1932; Smilansky, 1968; and Hulme and Lunzer, 1966). The developmental sequence of the play behaviors of the deaf subjects proceeded through the same stages, in the same order, as the play behaviors of the hearing subjects on each of the play scales used in the study: Social Play, Socio-dramatic Play, and Organization of Behaviors Scale. While not particularly remarkable, the empirical evidence suggests that deaf children play much as hearing children do. To simplify of the above study would be misleading. While it is true that the deaf subjects did exhibit play behaviors at the same rate and sequence as their hearing counterparts, there was a difference in the quantity, number of minutes spent at each level of play, between the two groups. For example, the deaf subjects spent more time in solitary play than

did their hearing counterparts. Consequently, they had less time to spend in parallel, associative and cooperative play. These results have been discussed elsewhere (Mann, 1981), but they tend to agree with the multidimensionality of solitary play addressed by Moore et.al. (1974), and Iwanga (1973).

Throughout the above investigation and from past experiences in many classrooms for young deaf children, several restrictions to play have been aparent; language, environment and education. The first and most obvious restriction to types of play behaviors exhibited deals with the inadequate ability to use verbal language as a result of congenital profound deafness. Because deaf children do not have a verbal communication system, they may be less likely to communicate and therefore more likely to play alone where communication is unnecessary. The second restriction may be environmental. The classroom environment may not be facilitative of play between children. Constant interruption of play by adults, a dearth of play equipment, and reward for quiet behavior are not conducive to play. The third restriction may be educational. If play is viewed as non-directional and frivolous, it is thought to be "non-educational". Therefore, less time is allowed for play and little encouragement is given to the players.

Oléron (1958) cites insufficient experiences and Furth (1966, 1971) suggests that "lack of information, less opportunity and training to think. . . and experiential and social factors of home, school, and the deaf community" may be contributors to quantitive, but not a qualitative difference in behaviors exhibited by deaf children.

The deaf children in the Mann (1981) study, across all ages, had scores which were equal to their hearing counterparts in all but the number of minutes spent in each category of play. This quantitative difference does not mean that the deaf child is less advanced than his hearing peers. Rather, as suggested by Furth (1966, 1971) and Oléron (1958), he has had less experience, training, opportunity and/or information. It would seem logical then, to provide the young deaf child with experiences, training, opportunity and information. This can be accomplished in an environment which has been designed to facilitate play development. The following guidelines will help the practitioner design such an environment.

There are four basic environmental components necessary to facilitating play development: adults to play with, materials and equipment to use in play, ample time to play, and a place to play. Specific suggestions for the implementation of each component will be offered below.

A. Adults to Play With.

1. Adults can be aware of the "etiquette" of play. By observing children at play adults can learn to ask to join in play, define their roles and play as the role dictates.

2. Physical proximity is an essential ingredient in play with children. Initiating play (by using new materials or old materials in a new way) near one or two children is often all the invitation necessary for the children to join in.

3. Create unresolved situations in play. Adults can be a catalyst for problem solving. (i.e., if "mother" works away from

"home" come "home" right after you have "left for work" with a cold and go to "bed"!].

4. Be a player rather than a director of play. By playing with the children there is less tendency to tell them "how to" play.

5. Use language appropriate to the situation, but keep in mind that by manipulating and experiencing objects in the environment the children are thinking and drawing conclusions -- a verbal label helps, but need not become the primary focus in play.

B. Materials and Equipment to Use in Play.

1. Open-ended, multi-use materials such as small and large blocks, clay, bowls, boxes are adapatable to most situations.

2. Dress-up clothing which is clean and accessible is conducive to use (i.e., a shoe barrel, a hat bag, pocketbook box, dresses, shirts, suits in a carton].

3. Fabric pieces are wonderful open-ended "costumes", "water", "snow", "sand", etc.

4. Housekeeping items such as brooms, mops, dishes, cooking and eating utensils are wonderful play enhancers.

5. Large muscle play equipment as well as small muscle play equipment should be available (i.e., trucks, wagons, tricycles, balance beams and cars as well as water, sand, small blocks, clay, etc.].

C. Time to Play.

1. The ideal situation for young children is to be involved in play all day. The teachers can place items in the environment

which will facilitate thinking skills. By interacting with the children as they are playing the emphasis centers on the process of experimentation, problem solving and cognitive development.

2. At least an hour is minimum for play time. Children need to "warm-up" and decide what to play (if all day is not acceptable).

3. For "good" dramatic play to develop at least 15 minutes is required for each incident.

4. Children need to play uninterrupted by adults (unless a dangerous situation develops). By simply watching children at play adults can learn a great deal about the children.

5. Children can fairly consistently determine their own pace of play behaviors from active to more quiet play, but time for both must be scheduled.

D. A Place to Play.

1. The inside environment should include the above materials and equipment. Organization is important in placing the items in the classroom for optimal use.

2. Large open spaces inside the classroom adjacent to the large play equipment are conducive to use of that equipment.

3. A housekeeping or dress-up area can be most conducive to dramatic play.

4. Outside areas need to be safe and accessible for optimal use.

5. Children soon learn an order to play spaces. By encouraging "pick up when through" children develop responsibility for caring for the toys and equipment. They also have a comfortable feeling that an item will be where it belongs the next time that it is needed.

Theoretical information has been presented which indicates that play is a primary agent for cognitive change. Empirical evidence which indicates that deaf children play much like their hearing peers has also be presented. It follows logically ther, that play is a primary agent for cognitive change for deaf children. The teacher of the deaf can choose to make the shift from a teacher-directed classroom to a child-centered environment by following the suggestions offered above. It is hoped that with this information, more teachers of young deaf children will utilize their skills in creating environments which will encourage play, thus facilitating cognitive development. When asked why the children are spending so much time play, the teacher can answer, "My children are thinking, learning, experimenting, interpreting, drawing inferences, and developing their level of cognitive functioning. They need time to do all this. This time that they need is called "Play".

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